

## Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 HA-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05  
H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01  
SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /074 W  
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R 060927Z JAN 78  
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7656  
INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD  
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU  
AMEMBASSY LONDON  
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

C O N F I D E N T I A L DACCA 0109

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PINS, SHUM, BG  
SUBJ: HUMAN RIGHTS: AMNESTY REPORT AND THE ECONOMIST

REF: 77 STATE A-4490

1. THE EMBASSY HAS REVIEWED THE SECTION ON BANGLA-  
DESH CONTAINED IN THE 1977 REPORT OF AMNESTY INTER-  
NATION (AI) WHICH WAS FORWARDED AS STATED IN REFAIRGRAM.  
OUR INITIAL REACTION IS THAT AI IS A MUCH MORE CAREFUL  
REPORTER WHEN IT PREPARES A DOCUMENT FOR PUBLICATION  
THAN IT IS WHEN IT ISSUES A BROADSIDE IN THE FORM OF A  
HASTILY DRAFTED LETTER OR A HURRIED PRESS RELEASE.  
THESE, IT SEEMS TO US, ARE MORE LIKELY TO TAKE THE STYLE  
OF SEVERAL PARAGRAPHS WHICH HAVE APPEARED IN THE  
DECEMBER 24, 1977, ISSUE OF THE ECONOMIST (PP. 50-51)  
OR THE EMANATIONS OF A GROUP SUCH AS THE OXFORD COMMITTEE  
ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH ASIA.

2. THE POLITICAL COMMENT IN THE ECONOMIST ARTICLE IN  
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MANY CASES PARALLELS THE ANALYSIS CONTAINED IN THE EMBASSY'S  
YEAR END TELEGRAM (77 DACCA 7479), I.E., THAT ECONOMIC  
CONDITIONS ARE VERY DIFFICULT AND THAT PRESIDENT ZIA IS  
TRYING TO TRANSFER POWER AND RESTORE FULL POLITICAL  
ACTIVITIES IN AN ORDERLY WAY, BUT LIKE MANY WHO HAVE  
LEAD MILITARY GOVERNMENTS HE FINDS THIS NOT AN EASY TASK.  
WE THINK IT LIKELY THAT ZIA MAY HOLD A PRESIDENTIAL

ELECTION BEFORE THE NEXT MONSOON AND WE ARE INCLINED TO AGREE THAT THERE WAS A BURST OF OVERENTHUSIASM BY LOCAL OFFICIALS IN INFLATING THE PARTICIPATION LEVEL IN THE MAY REFERENDUM, BUT TO ASSIGN TO THE LATTER THE PRESENT PROBLEMS OF THE COUNTRY SEEMS CAVALIER.

3. IT IS, HOWEVER, THE ASSERTION THAT THERE ARE 65,000 POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BANGLADESH WHICH APPEARS TO US TO BE PATENTLY ABSURD. WE DO NOT KNOW WHICH "WESTERN ESTIMATE" IS CITED, BUT IT MAY WELL BE SPIN-OFF FROM MIKE CHEROY CBS REPORT (77 STATE 269574 AND 77 DACCA 6513). OUR CONVERSATIONS WITH OUR DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUES HERE ASSUREDLY DO NOT INDICATE THAT ANY OF THEM WOULD HAVE USED SO HIGH A FIGURE. SOME SOURCES STATE THAT THERE MAY BE AS MANY AS 1500 REMAINING IN PRISON WHO COULD UNDER THE BROADEST DEFINITION BE CONSIDERED POLITICAL PRISONERS. THIS CONTRADICTS THE STATEMENT MADE BY PRESIDENT ZIA TO AMBASSADOR MASTERS (77 DACCA 6761), BUT IT MAY WELL BE CURRENTLY THE BEST ESTIMATE AVAILABLE. (WE NOTE, OF COURSE, THAT THE PRESIDENT'S FIGURE WAS DISCREDITED WHEN THE VICTORY DAY RELEASES TOTALLED MORE THAN 900.)

4. THE ECONOMIST ARTICLE WAS BY-LINED TO "OUR SUB-CONTINENT CORRESPONDENT". WE SUSPECT IT PROBABLY WAS NOT THE LOCAL STRINGER, WHOSE IDENTITY IS WELL KNOWN CONFIDENTIAL

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AND WHO WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO WANT TO HAVE HIMSELF ASSOCIATED WITH SUCH AN ARTICLE. IT MAY WELL HAVE BEEN WRITTEN IN INDIA WHERE THE PRESS HAS CARRIED EXAGGERATED REPORTS OF CONDITIONS IN BANGLADESH.

5. ON THE AI REPORT ITSELF WE BELIEVE THAT EVEN AS OF THE DATE OF INFORMATION THE ESTIMATE OF "10,000 TO 15,000" PRISONERS IS TOO HIGH. THE WIDE RANGE OF THE EXTIMATE ITSELF MAKES IT LESS THAN CREDIBLE. ON OTHER MATTERS IN THE REPORT THERE IS CLEARLY SCOPE FOR DIFFERING OPINIONS, ALTHOUGH THERE CAN BE LITTLE SUPPORT FOR A JUDICIAL SYSTEM WHICH HOLDS SPECIAL TRIALS IN CAMERA AND WHICH DENIES OR RESTRICTS THE RIGHT OF LEGAL COUNSEL. THE RECENT DISMANTLING OF THE MARTIAL LAW SYSTEM FOR GOVERNING AND THE MODIFICATIONS OF THE POWERS OF THE MARTIAL LAW COURTS GO SOME WAY TOWARD MEETING THIS OBJECTION. THERE REMAINS MORE TO BE DONE BUT OUR IMPRESSION IS THAT THE JUDICIAL PROCEDURES ARE MOVING TOWARD GREATER CONFORMITY WITH INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED NORMS.

6. SIMILARLY WE BELIEVE THERE IS A CONSCIOUS EFFORT

TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF POLITICAL PRISONERS, BOTH  
THOSE CONVICTED AND THOSE BEING HELD WITHOUT TRIAL, ALTHOUGH  
THIS IS TEMPERED BY DEEPLY HELD (AND, PROBABLY, VALID)  
CONCERNS FOR INTERNAL SECURITY IN A NATION WHICH CAN HARDLY  
AFFORD ADDITIONAL LAW AND ORDER PROBLEMS IN ITS FRAGILE  
CONDITION. BANGLADESH MAY BE TROUBLESOME FROM  
A HUMAN RIGHTS POINT OF VIEW, BUT IT IS MORE TROUBLESOME  
FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF SURVIVAL.  
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## Message Attributes

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